

Sighs of relief at the country club

by Randal Edgar, BHDDH Public Information Officer

LINCOLN — The Kirkbrae Country Club is often home to weddings, receptions and corporate meetings, but of late it's also become a place where people with reason to worry about COVID-19 can find some peace of mind.

These guests, more than 4,000 of them, have come over the past few weeks — not to dine or celebrate, but to get COVID vaccines that Rhode Island has made available to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

"I was so excited," said Veronica Lynn Schenck, 46, of Cranston, after she was vaccinated on Feb. 10. "I was searching the internet, wondering 'when am I going to get the vaccine?'"

Kirkbrae, with its elegant dining rooms and banquet halls, was a busy place that day.

In the parking lot, a dozen volunteers guided traffic and offered instructions to those who would be walking over to the clubhouse and others, smaller in number, who would be vaccinated right in their cars. Traffic also lined up on Old River Road, where a police officer halted vehicle to let those who came for shots and those escorting them get to and from the clubhouse.

Inside the clubhouse, more than 20 volunteers from the Rhode Island Disaster Medical Assistance Team's Medical Reserve Corps set up at a wall of tables to administer the vaccines. At times, the line of people waiting extended outside the clubhouse, out toward the road. But for those who thought the wait seemed long, there was live entertainment — provided by a vocal-guitar duo of Eric Fontana, community navigator at West Bay RI, and Raymond Memery, Executive Director at Avatar Residential.



As at other COVID vaccination sites, those receiving the vaccine were asked to sit and wait for 15 minutes to make sure there were no allergic reactions.

"They're doing a good job. Everything is orderly, everything was easy, with so many people," said John Crandall, a retired firefighter from Charlestown who brought his nephew to get the vaccine. "They've got it organized very well."

The timing of COVID vaccinations for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities has been contentious in some states, with advocates arguing that this vulnerable population should be higher on the priority lists, but Rhode Island moved quickly to make the vaccines available.

Tina Spears, executive director of the Community Provider Network of Rhode Island (CPNRI), said the state Department of Health encouraged her organization and the Department of

Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals (BHDDH) to move forward and make it happen. CPNRI led the way, partnering with Medical Reserve Corps members who have donated their time. She also credited Kirkbrae for “being a gracious partner and host.”

“We’re well on the way to getting everybody vaccinated,” she said.

The vaccines have brought sighs of relief.

Jackie Gendron, of North Kingstown, drove up with her 24-year-old daughter, Renee.

“She needed to be vaccinated,” Jackie Gendron said. “Her life right now is in the house. We go out, we go for walks, things like that, but not the normal things that she does. She’s not back in services. She’s also going through a medically difficult time right now, so she needed this. She needs people, and right now, she doesn’t have people.”

Asked if getting the vaccine hurt, an otherwise happy Renee Gendron answered with a matter-of-fact “yes.” But others had different views.

Justin Panciera, 30, of Westerly, was among those who said the vaccine didn’t hurt. In fact, he was looking forward to getting the second shot, because then, he hopes to take a vacation with his mother.

“Every year my mom and I go on a cruise for our Christmas vacation, but this year we couldn’t,” he said.

Studies have indicated that COVID presents greater risks for individuals with developmental disabilities, because they are more likely to have underlying medical conditions. The Centers for Disease Control has added Down syndrome to the list of high-risk medical conditions for those who have COVID, and it has recommended that states prioritize the vaccines for individuals living in long-term care facilities. But it has not specifically said that individuals with developmental disabilities should be part of the first rounds of vaccinations, and instead has left that decision to the states.



Here in Rhode Island, Spears said, the right voices were heard.

“Many of the individuals you see here today have differing disabilities, and depending on those disabilities, they also have some medical conditions that put them at a very high risk,” she said. “But we had strong advocacy, and we had strong partners with the Department of Health, who recognized this population as being a priority. We advocated and they listened, and we had a great partner in BHDDH. It’s really just hard work and advocacy that got this over the goal line, and commitment from our state partners.”

Schenck, who was among those who said the shot didn’t hurt, said she too is looking forward to getting the second.

“I come back in 28 days,” she said.